

# Poetry? It's Worth a Try!

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*By Antonio Luciano de A. Tosta*

The American poet Archibald MacLeish said that "A poem should not mean but be." However, in the search for the "real meaning" of a poem, EFL teachers are concerned that using poetry in their language classes will shift their role from that of facilitators encouraging student responses to the more traditional one of imparting information. Poetry is seen as an art appealing only to an intellectual group of persons and, therefore, out of the range of ordinary people. If a teacher mentions in class that s/he will be working with a poem on the following day, this will not have the same positive impact on students as if s/he had said that s/he would be using songs or video tapes. Thus, poetry has been neglected as a tool for language instruction.

Nevertheless, there are very good reasons to integrate poetry into the EFL classroom. One reason is that poems usually deal with universal themes, such as love or hate, which are familiar to all readers. Secondly, poems bring contexts which are not only rich culturally but also linguistically. There is also the additional advantage of length, which makes many poems easy to remember and thus well suited to a single classroom lesson. Even the myth of complexity can be positively approached and serve as a motivational factor, since students will have a feeling of accomplishment as they successfully work with a poem in class. However, in order to avoid frustration, one must make sure that the poem is suited to the interest and language level of the particular group of students s/he is working with.

A poem should be meaningful and enjoyable. It is important to select activities which encourage group work and promote curiosity and exploration of the literature. If you vary types of activities and promote class interaction, the next time you bring a poem to class that old, dreadful feeling will not come up anymore. Poems can be used as warmups, reading exercises, listening activities, for grammar presentation or practice as well as for practicing pronunciation and writing. They may be used for a whole class or for part of it. It is worth a try! Here is an example:

## Class X:

*Focus:* Intonation/Adjectives

*Level:* Intermediate

*Skills:* Speaking/Reading

How do you feel in the following situations? ( *Discussion* )

1. First time you go out with a girl/boy.

a. Nervous

- b. Anxious
- c. Excited
- d. Enthusiastic

2. First day on a job.

- a. Tense
- b. Disconcerted
- c. Insecure
- d. Excited

3. On the day of your wedding.

- a. Happy
- b. Anxious
- c. Sad
- d. Discouraged

4. On test days.

- a. Nervous
- b. Self-confident
- c. Worried
- d. Excited

5. You/your girlfriend got pregnant unexpectedly.

- a. Excited
- b. Thoughtful
- c. Desperate
- d. Proud

### **Situation:**

Imagine that you and a friend went to a party yesterday. You had a nice chat with a beautiful woman/handsome man, whom you felt your friend wanted to impress. On your way home that evening, s/he kept asking you about his/her behavior that night. Here are some of his/her questions:

Was I interesting?

Was I witty?

Was I smart?

Did I say the right things?

## Group work:

Select a poem such as John Updike's "Thoughts while Driving Home"\* which begins with the following stanza:

Was I clever enough? Was I charming?  
Did I make at least one good pun?  
Was I disconcerting? Disarming?  
Was I wise? Was I wan? Was I fun?

Read it out loud and discuss it with the group. Ask the students to try to express how s/he felt. They should ask their classmates to try to guess his/her feelings. Here are some suggestions:

- a. Desperate
- b. Thoughtful
- c. Enthusiastic
- d. Discouraged
- e. Proud
- f. Nervous

## Follow Up Discussion:

Has anything like that ever happened to you?  
Do you trust your first impressions? Why?

\*This poem can be found in most anthologies of twentieth century American literature and/or poetry.

**Antonio Luciano de A. Tosta** is teaching English Language and Methodology at UNEB, (Bahia State University) and at the ACBEU and UEC in Salvador-Bahia, Brazil.

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